

# The Role of Race within the Suffrage Movement

\*Terms used today, "Racism", "Racial Discrimination", "White Superiority," and similar terms used to describe bigotry based on skin color or ethnicity were not in use during 19 th century in America. Some 19 th century terminology (not an exhaustive list) include, "Colorphobia," "those of the dominant race" (to refer to whites), "Negrophobia" and verbal and written descriptions of situations or circumstance that reflect racism as modernly defined.

\*\* "African-American" was not in use during 19 th century America. Words used (not an exhaustive list) to refer to African-Americans were, "Black" or "Blacks", "Coloreds," "Negros", "slave," and "former slave."

## What was the American Equal Rights Association?

The American Equal Rights Association (AERA) was founded by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton during the 11 th National Women's Rights Convention of 1866 held in New York City. The organization's president was Lucretia Mott and its membership included many men and women from the Abolition movement, including Lucy Stone, Julia Ward Howe, and Fredrick Douglass, Henry Blackwell and black suffragists, Sarah Parker Remond and Frances Ellen Walker Harper, and others. AERA's constitution stated that they, "worked to secure equal rights to all American citizens, especially the rights of suffrage, irrespective of race, color or sex ([www.britannica.com/American-Equal-Rights-Association](http://www.britannica.com/American-Equal-Rights-Association))."

## Why was the AERA dissolved in 1870?

AERA operated from 1866-1869 and formally dissolved in 1870. This dissolution was primarily the result of disagreements over strategy. On one side of the argument were those members who supported the 15 th Amendment, granting black men the right to vote. On the other side were the members who opposed passage of the 15 th Amendment without a 16 th Amendment granting women's suffrage to black and white women alike.

Upon the dissolution of AERA, those members such as Lucy Stone, Julia Ward Howe, and Frances Ellen Watkin Harper, who saw the 15th Amendment as a stepping stone to women's suffrage, co-founded the American Women's Suffrage Association (AWSA) while other members, such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who believed that the 15 th Amendment was a deterrent to women's suffrage, broke off and formed the National Women's Suffrage Association (NWSA). The rift between suffragists continued for 20 years and had a lasting impact on the suffragist movement. In 1890, the two organizations merged into the National American Women's Suffrage Association (NAWSA) under the direction of Susan B. Anthony.

## What were other reasons for AERA's dissolution?

Other reasons for the dissolution of AERA include the political loyalty of many abolitionist members to the Republican Party, which opposed women's suffrage (although not as strongly as did the Democratic Party) and a deep-seated bias among the abolitionist men regarding divorce that made them want to separate years before from the issue of women's suffrage.

## Who was George Francis Train?

George Francis Train was a wealthy philanthropist and controversial political figure of the 19th century who publicly questioned the integrity and the intelligence of black people and supported women's suffrage as a means to "contain the political power of blacks (DuBois, 1978)." His attitude towards black people angered and disgusted abolitionist-suffragist members, like Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone and many others members of the American Equal Rights Association (AERA). This anger intensified when in 1867, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton invited Train to accompany them to the Kansas meeting of the AERA and accepted his financial help to prop up the faltering campaign intended to push for suffrage for both women and blacks. Anthony and Stanton's willingness to collaborate with Train led Lucretia Mott to render her resignation as president in 1868, and their association with Train was a contributing factor in the 1870 dissolution of the AERA.

In 1868, Susan B. Anthony again accepted financial funding from Train to begin publishing *The Revolution*. In fact, Train's articles frequently appear in the newspaper. According to Faye Dudden, author of "Fighting Chance: The Struggle over Women Suffrage and Black Suffrage in Reconstruction America," Anthony and Stanton attempted to lead Train away from his more extreme attitudes toward blacks, and may have had some success in doing so.

### **Who was Francis Ellen Watkins Harper?**

Francis Ellen Watkins Harper was an African-American author, poet and suffragist invited by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton to address the 11th Women's Rights Convention held in New York City in 1866. Harper delivered a powerful speech titled, "We Are All Bound up Together," where she says, "We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity, and society cannot trample on the weakest and feeblest of its members without receiving the curse in its own soul."

In this address Harper criticizes the racial indifference of white women, including those within the suffragist movement, by saying:

"Talk of giving women the ballot-box? Go on. It is a normal school, and the white women of this country need it. While there exists this brutal element in society which tramples upon the feeble and treads down the weak, I tell you that if there is any class of people who need to be lifted out of their airy nothings and selfishness, it is the white women of America."

Following the Convention, Harper became an active member of the American Equal Rights Association (AERA), founded by Anthony and Stanton, and a supporter of the 15th Amendment.

She agreed with Frederick Douglass that securing the voting rights of black men should take priority over women's suffrage. As the only black speaker to take the floor at the contentious 1869 AERA meeting, Harper again criticized white suffragists by saying:

"I do not believe that giving the woman the ballot is immediately going to cure all the ills of life. I do not believe that white women are dew-drops just exhaled from the skies. I think that like men they may be divided into three classes, the good, the bad, and the indifferent. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/how-daughters-and-granddaughters-former-slaves-secured-voting-rights-all-180971660/>."

Upon the dissolution of AERA following the 1869 AERA meeting, Harper co-founded the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) along with Lucy Stone and Julia Ward Howe.

### **Who was Sarah Parker Remond?**

Sarah Parker Remond was a noted African-American suffragist and lecturer. In 1853, after refusing to leave seating for whites-only at an opera house, Howard Athenaeum, in Boston, police arrived to escort her out. In the process, Remond fell down the stairs and subsequently won a civil suit that ended the segregated seating at the theater. Later, beginning in 1856, she served on the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) with Susan B. Anthony and became a member of the American Equal Rights Association (AERA).

### **Why did Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the National Women's Suffrage Association and The Revolution writers oppose the 15 th Amendment?**

The 15 th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution "prohibited the right to vote being denied on the basis of race, color or previous condition of servitude (Rakow, 47)." However, with the introduction of the word male within the 14 th Amendment (granting citizenship and due process), the 15 th Amendment effectively granted voting rights to black men but not to women, black or White.

Susan B. Anthony's response to J.K. Phoenix in *The Revolution* on October 7, 1869, astutely describes their position:

"The Revolution criticizes, 'opposes' the fifteenth amendment, not for what it is, but for what it is not. Not because it enfranchises black men, but because it does not enfranchise all women, black and white. It is not the little good it proposes, but the greater evil it perpetuates that we deprecate. It is not that in the abstract we do not rejoice that black men are to become equals of white men, but that we deplore the fact that two million (sic) black women, hitherto the political and social equals of the men by their side, are to become subjects, slaves of these men. Our protest is not that all men are lifted out of the degradation of disfranchisement, but that all women are left in. The Revolution and the National Women's Suffrage Association make women's suffrage their test of loyalty, not Negro suffrage, not Maine law or prohibition. Do you believe women should vote? Is the one and only question in our catechism (Stanton, et, el, 340)."

Their criticism of the 15 th Amendment was consistent and spanned its introduction to its passage in February 1870 and beyond. Earlier, on July 15, 1869, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who considered the 15 th Amendment to be a "half measure," said this in *The Revolution*:

"We have no possible objection to all men on the footstool, doing their own voting, but we do object most decidedly to any more of man's legislation for women. We have tried that to our full satisfaction, until we are painfully alive to its danger and to the deep humiliation of an aristocracy of sex, making every woman the political inferior of every man on this continent. We oppose the Fifteenth Amendment, not because it does too much, but too little... (Rakow, 50)."

This refusal of the National Women's Suffrage Association (NWSA) to accept the passage of suffrage to black men without simultaneously granting women's suffrage may have led black suffragists who were willing to accept the 15 th Amendment to work towards women's suffrage through the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) rather than the NWSA.

## **Was Anthony and Stanton's opposition to the 15 th Amendment evidence of racial Discrimination?**

In defending her opposition to a stand-alone 15 th Amendment, Stanton uses language that most modern readers would find racially offensive. For example, appearing on December 24, 1868, in an article titled, "Manhood Suffrage," Stanton writes in no uncertain terms about the harm that will fall upon women should men be allowed to make all of the legislative decisions for them. She writes,

"Think of Patrick and Sambo and Hans and Yung Tung who do not know the difference between a Monarchy and a Republic, who never read the Declaration of Independence or Webster's spelling book, making laws for Lydia Maria Child, Lucretia Mott or Fanny Kemble. Think of jurors drawn from these ranks to try young girls for the crime of Infanticide."

And again, 10 months before the passage of the 15 th Amendment, in "The Sixteenth Amendment," Stanton calls on certain women to take action. She writes,

"American women of wealth, education, virtue and refinement, if you do not wish the lower orders of Chinese, Africans, Germans and Irish, with their low ideas of womanhood to make laws for you and your daughters, to be your rulers, judges, jurors-to dictate not only the civil, but moral codes by which you shall be governed, awake to the danger or your present position, and demand that woman, too shall be represented in the government (Stanton, April 29, 1869)!"

When commenting on the use of offensive language and stereotypes by Stanton, Lana Rakow and Cheri Kramarae, editors of "The Revolution in words: Righting Women 1868-1871," point out that Stanton was trying to use their opponents' own arguments against them and that use of such language could be understood in the context of "cultural milieu (Rakow, 48)."

In contrast, Brent Staples, The New York Times editor writes in "How the Suffrage Movement Betrayed Black Women" that historians Barkley-Brown, Ginsberg and Terborg-Penn expose Stanton as "a classic liberal racist who embraced fairness in the abstract while publicly enunciating bigoted views of African-American men, who she characterized as 'Sambos...' (Staples, 2018)."

It should be noted Stanton's comments did not go unchallenged at the time. During the American Equal Rights Association (AERA) March 1869 meeting, Fredrick Douglass publicly admonished Stanton for her use of the racially derogatory Sambo in "Manhood Suffrage."

On July 4, 1868, Susan B. Anthony wrote a letter to the Democratic Convention requesting she be granted an audience. Her hope was to convince the Party to support women's suffrage. This willingness to collaborate with Democrats, a party which opposed black suffrage and stood in the way of Reconstruction efforts, angered some Republican loyalists within the American Equal Rights Association (AERA). This letter could be considered by modern readers as evidence that Susan B. Anthony was willing to appeal to the party's racism in order to promote her own agenda, to secure women's suffrage. In the letter she writes,

“While the dominant party has with one hand lifted up two million black men and crowned them with the honor and dignity of citizenship, with the other, it has dethroned fifteen million white women-their own mothers and sisters, their own wives and daughters-and cast them under the heel of the lowest order of manhood (Stanton, et al, 341).”

Later in the letter, Anthony appeals to the Democrats to “turn from the dead questions of the past” and writes,

“The brute form of slavery ended with the war. The black man is a soldier and a citizen. He holds the bullet and the ballot in his own right hand. Consider the case settled (Stanton, et al, 342).”

When considering the question of racial discrimination, it is important to examine an entire body of evidence rather than rely on isolated quotes. Rakow and Kramarae remind us that, “The Revolution consistently supported suffrage for Black women and editorial commentary frequently deplored racism (called ‘colorphobia’). Reports of the successes of Black women and men as well as their unjustified ill-treatment were carried in its pages (Rakow, 48).”

### **Who was Mary Ann Shadd Cary?**

Mary Ann Shadd Cary, an African-American abolitionist and suffragist, was the first woman in North America to edit and publish a newspaper (The Provincial Freeman). Cary was also one of the first American female lawyers. According to her biographer, Jane Rhodes, Mary “stayed close to the National Women’s Suffrage Association” (Staples, 2019) and organized a large group of black suffragists who attempted to register to vote in Washington, D.C. in 1871 but were turned away. This was one year prior to Susan B. Anthony’s illegal vote. Cary is also

known as the first African-American woman to have addressed the House Judiciary Committee, doing so in January 1874, the same year that Anthony wrote a letter to Congress petitioning to dismiss her fine.

### **What is the “History of Women’s Suffrage”?**

The History of Women’s Suffrage is a six-volume series of books written by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joselyn Gage and Ida Husted-Harper, published from 1881-1922. The volumes detail the American suffrage movement from its inception until the passage of the 19th Amendment. The volumes focus on the activities of its authors and the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and later, on the activities of the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) but minimizes the role of the AWSA and excludes the activism of African American women. This minimization and exclusion draws criticism from modern historians.

According to historian Ann Gordon and Lucy Stone’s biographer Andre Moore Kerr, Stanton did reach out to Stone, leader of the AWSA, with an invitation to write her account of her activities for History of Women’s Suffrage, but Stone declined. Stone also asked Stanton not to include her biography in the book. Later, Stanton’s daughter Harriet compiled a chapter detailing the work of AWSA. This chapter comprises 107 pages out of the book’s more than 5,700 pages. When writing about History of Women’s Suffrage, historian Lisa Tetrault, author of *The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women’s Suffrage Movement*, strongly suggests that Stanton and

Anthony created a one-dimensional narrative of what had been, in fact, “a sprawling, multifaceted campaign (143).” Tetrault’s book concludes that Anthony and Stanton placed themselves and their allies at the center of the story and minimized the activities of Stone and others whose work might challenge their narrative.

Similar criticisms have been made over the narrow perspective of History of Women’s Suffrage regarding the exclusion of African-American women suffragists. In particular, Brent Staples, an editor at The New York Times, points to the exclusion of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, an African-American author, poet and suffragist who delivered a powerful speech titled, “We Are All Bound up Together” during the 11 th National Women’s Rights Convention of 1866 held in New York City. In the February 2, 2019 editorial, Staples points to historian Nell Irvin Painter’s argument that even though this convention is heavily detailed in History of Women’s Suffrage, the authors intentionally omitted any mention of Harper’s speech because the content of her argument criticized white suffragists for not recognizing the role of race and because they disliked her polish preferring the more “uneducated version of black womanhood embodied by the formerly enslaved suffragist Sojourner Truth.”

It could be debated whether or not this exclusion of black suffragist activity was maliciously deliberate and systematic, ethnocentric or egocentric. Fortunately, in 1959 with Eleanor Flexner’s Century of Struggle: The Women’s Rights Movement in the United States and increasingly over the past decade, historians have unearthed a rich history of African-American Suffragist history that re-informs and expands the understanding of the women’s suffrage movement.

### **Who was Fannie Barrier Williams?**

Fannie Barrier Williams was a native of Brockport, N.Y., an abolition and suffrage reformer and the first black women admitted into the selective Chicago Woman’s Club. Williams played an important role in the African-American Woman’s Club movement and helped to found the Colored Women’s League (CWL) in 1893 and its successor, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in 1896. She is known to have fought hard for services for African-American women and their children in Chicago and co-founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in New York. Williams also served as a department head for the first African-American monthly magazine, The Women’s Era. According to Barbara LeSavoy from the Women’s Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls, “Williams was a prolific author who also fought for social and gender justice (Rocheleau, 2020).” Williams, along with Emily Howland, Rachel Foster Avery and Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones delivered eulogies for Susan B. Anthony at the National Suffrage Convention on March 9, 1907.

### **What was the National Association of Colored Women?**

The National Association of Colored Women (NACW) was established in 1896 and was the merging of several black women’s clubs including the National League of Colored Women and the National Federation of Afro-American Women. With the motto, “Lifting as we climb,” the NACW sought a wide range of reforms in an effort to “lift up” the black community. Reforms included women’s suffrage, fair labor practices and better job opportunities for black people, anti-lynching laws, anti-Jim Crow laws and better education for black children. The NACW also created homes for the elderly, kindergarten classes for young children, and offered child-rearing classes and classes in sewing and tips for creating good home lives. NACW was founded by Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin and Mary Church Terrell welcomed people from all races. It became

the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs in 1906.

### **Who was Mary Church Terrell?**

Mary Church Terrell was an African-American reformer who began in the anti-lynching movement after her friend was killed by lynching, and was an early supporter of a 16<sup>th</sup> Amendment seeking to grant women suffrage simultaneously along with black men. Terrell was the first president of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and a contributing department head of the first African-American monthly women's magazine *The Women's Era*. When she moved to Washington, D. C., she frequently attended meetings held by the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). At one such meeting, Terrell stood and asked to present a resolution addressing the wrongs experienced by African-Americans of which she writes, "And thus began a delightful, helpful friendship with Susan B. Anthony which lasted until she passed away" (Terrell, 5). Anthony played host to Terrell in Rochester, N.Y., on at least two separate occasions.

In 1898, Terrell was invited to speak at the NAWSA on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the First Women's Rights Convention with a speech titled, "The Progress of Colored Women." Her speech detailed the great strides made by women, especially Southern black women since emancipation and praised them for their dedication to the mission of raising up all black people through education. Terrell concludes with her great hope:

"And so, lifting as we climb, onward and upward we go, struggling and striving and, and hoping that the buds and blossoms of our desire will burst into glorious fruition ere long (<https://www.loc.gov/item/90898298/>)."

Terrell went on to address the NWSA on several more times, including in 1904 where she addressed white suffragists in attendance:

"My sisters of the dominant race, stand up not only for the oppressed sex but also for the oppressed race (<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/original-womens-march-washington-and-suffragists-who-paved-way-180961869/>)!"

She was active in women's suffrage and civil rights until her death in 1954.

### **Who was Ida B. Wells-Barnett?**

Ida B. Wells-Barnett was an African-American suffragist and journalist who led anti-lynching campaigns across the U.S. and British Isles and who worked to end Jim Crow Laws. She organized the first black women's suffrage club, a black settlement home and the first kindergarten for black children, all in Chicago, IL.

In March, 1895, Wells-Barnett traveled to Rochester, New York to speak at the First Baptist Church as part of her efforts to raise awareness about the need for anti-lynching laws. Susan B. Anthony, then 75 years old, was in attendance that evening and came to her aid against a Texan heckler. Anthony invited Ida to stay at her home for the remainder of her time in Rochester. During this stay, their conversations included news of their mutual friend Fredrick Douglass and the question of "political expediency", the argument that if white women could secure the right to vote, they would use their vote to enfranchise black women. When asked her opinion about

this idea as a strategy, Ida replied that she believed it only “confirmed segregationist attitudes” (Giddings, p. 351). Despite this difference in opinion, Anthony and Wells-Barnett maintained mutual respect for each other and continued a friendly acquaintance for the remainder of Anthony’s life. The story of Ida’s stay was included in Anthony’s, *The Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony* of which she was given a signed copy as a gift.

### **What was the 1913 Woman Suffrage Parade?**

The 1913 Woman Suffrage Parade, held in Washington, D.C., on March 3, 1913 was organized by Alice Paul and Lucy Burns, future founders of the National Women’s Party. 5,000 women participated in the parade before a crowd of 500,000 spectators, some of whom were angered by the spectacle. In recent years, the parade has come under strong criticism from historians and journalists because the organizers of the parade willingly complied with Jim Crow laws and required black women to march together at the back of the procession. The Jim Crow laws mandated the separation of the races in public areas and violators were subject to arrest, fines, jail or worse. In the July 28, 2018 New York Times opinion piece “How the Suffrage Movement Betrayed Black Women”, Brent Staples calls the parade, “the most blatant example of accommodationism (2018).”

Ida B. Wells defied the white suffragists and marched in the parade with the Illinois delegation while Mary Church Terrell complied, marching in the “colored” section with her university sorority, Delta Sigma Theta. She later said of the parade:

“We marched that day in order that women might become their own, because we believe that women not only needed an education, but a broader horizon in which they may use that education. The right to vote would give them that (<https://speakola.com/ideas/mary-church-terrell-united-womens-club-1906>).”

The parade of 1913 was also a scene of violent attacks against the women by spectators resulting in 100 women injured. The superintendent of police for the District of Columbia lost his job as a result of his conduct.

After the passage of the 19 th Amendment in 1920, was universal suffrage achieved?

No. Prior to the 19 th Amendment, women in 11 states, including Arizona, California, Utah and Wyoming, had the right to vote by 1916. However, most of these states excluded women of color. Even after 1920, with the passage of the 19 th Amendment, many African-American, American-Indian and Latino women were excluded from the vote due to imposed barriers. Some barriers to voting included high “poll taxes,” unfair literacy tests, grandfather clauses requiring proof that a voter’s grandfather had voted in a previous election and English-only ballots. It wasn’t until 1965, after a hard push from African-American women to pass the Voting Rights Act that many of these barriers were prohibited, allowing women more access to the polls. In 1975, with an extension to the Voting Rights Act, bi-lingual ballot cards were provided for non-English speaking voters.

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